

Chicago schools chief threatens to lock out teachers who don't return to school buildings Monday

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The Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which is independent of the CTU and Democratic Party, is fighting to close schools and fully fund remote learning. Our committee aims to unite educators, parents, students and the broader working class to prepare strike action to close all schools and nonessential workplaces. We call on all Chicago educators, parents and students to join our committee at wsws.org/edsafety. Attend and help build for our next meeting today, at 12 p.m. Central Time.

As Chicago educators continue to vote on a Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) resolution in support of teaching remotely, and to strike only in the event of retaliation from the school district, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) CEO Janice Jackson reiterated at a Friday news conference that such an action “would constitute a strike.”

Although Jackson insisted, “We’re not locking teachers out,” indications are that CPS officials will cut educators off from their district-provided Google accounts, preventing them from teaching remotely. This has already been done to dozens of teachers in the district, to which the CTU has responded with no collective actions as at least 87 teachers remain locked out.

The aggressive push to reopen schools comes as COVID-19 continues to spread uncontrollably in Chicago and Illinois. Despite an elevated test positivity rate of 7.6 percent in Chicago, top Democratic officials are now pushing to reopen restaurants throughout the city and other regions of the state. The reopening of restaurants and schools, amid record levels of infections, will only deepen the transmission of COVID-19, leading to higher infection rates and death.

On Friday, the Illinois Department of Public Health announced that if “metrics continue to improve or are stable,” then Chicago and Cook County will move down

from Tier 2 to Tier 1 of Illinois Democratic Governor J.B. Pritzker’s 3-tiered system, with Tier 3 being the strictest.

Under Tier 1, indoor seating at 25 percent capacity or 25 people per room, whichever is less, will be allowed for restaurants and bars that serve food. For bars that do not serve food, the city has created a loophole that allows indoor seating if they partner with a restaurant to deliver food onsite.

Additionally, the state is allowing all youth sports to resume in parts of the state that move to Phase 4, a less restrictive step above Tier 1. As of this writing, parts of the state that have moved to Phase 4 include Region 3 (Southwest Illinois), Region 5 (Southern Illinois) and Region 6 (East Central Illinois). Chicago and Cook County will very likely move to Tier 1 on Saturday.

Under the new ruling, higher-risk sports which necessitate very close or direct contact between people, like football, basketball and wrestling, will now be allowed.

Chicago’s Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot, who has overseen the deadly reopening of the city’s schools, has pushed for Pritzker to reopen restaurants in Chicago after they were shuttered last November. On January 14, Lightfoot stated, “I am very, very focused on getting our restaurants reopened.”

Commenting on the reopenings, Pritzker said, “Look around the nation outside of Illinois, and you’ll see the pandemic at its worst in many places. The risk of a resurgence in Illinois, particularly with extremely contagious new variants, is serious. Our ability to have limited indoor restaurant service and to restart youth sports could be cut short if we aren’t extremely careful.”

As of yesterday, there have been 18,615 COVID-19-related deaths in Illinois. Friday saw 7,042 new cases of coronavirus and 95 additional deaths. During

what was considered the first wave of the pandemic last May, Illinois cases peaked at roughly 4,000 per day. Since November, cases have consistently far surpassed the 4,000 high point of last year.

Scientific studies, cited by Pritzker himself, have found restaurants to be strong vectors for the transmission of COVID-19.

The reopening of restaurants is like pouring gasoline on a wildfire. The pandemic is running rampant and the Democrats are creating the conditions for its further spread, which is particularly dangerous with the growth of new variants, some of which appear to have higher lethality and potential resistance to vaccines.

Attendance numbers for in-person learning indicate that the clear danger is evident to the working class, with only 19 percent of eligible students showing up citywide. This will only be compounded by the reckless decision to reopen Chicago's public schools for all K-8 students in the coming weeks which, as seen in other cities where schools have reopened, will add to the uptick in COVID-19 cases.

Yesterday, CPS unrolled its vaccination plan for CPS teachers, admitting that it could take weeks or even months for all teachers to be vaccinated. In reality, the city receives only 34,000 doses per week currently and 660,000 are eligible to be vaccinated, including teachers.

By reopening schools in Chicago, Lightfoot and her Democratic administration are literally sending educators and students to their possible deaths. Chicago teachers, however, overwhelmingly oppose the reopening of schools.

With teacher protests opposing the unsafe reopening occurring over the past two weeks, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) House of Delegates approved a very limited resolution on Thursday which stated, "Do you authorize the CTU to conduct remote work only, starting on January 25, 2021, or on whatever date the Board requires K-8 members to appear in person? In addition, in the event that CPS retaliates against or locks out members as a result, do you authorize a strike?"

With the resolution passing the House of Delegates by 84 percent, CTU's full membership, which has until tonight to vote, will likely pass the measure and authorize its members to refuse to report to schools in-person on Monday.

The CTU, which is intimately tied to the Democratic Party, only issued the resolution calling for a strike authorization vote in an effort to let off steam and posture as an organization genuinely fighting for teacher's

interest. Behind closed doors, the union has met with CPS officials for over 60 rounds of negotiations since the start of the school year, and both sides are furiously working to reach a miserable agreement to forestall any strike action by educators.

The fight by Chicago educators, students and parents to oppose deadly in-person learning must be waged outside the grip of the CTU and the Democratic Party. The history of the CTU proves definitively that they will sell teachers out.

The experience of the 2019 Chicago teachers strike demonstrated that even if a strike is called, the CTU will do everything in its power to suffocate it. CTU leaders have stated repeatedly their intent not to strike and have directly allowed the reopening of schools over the past three weeks. The union has floated multiple proposals to the district, none of which include fully remote instruction until the virus is contained. All include some kind of in-person instruction.

The fight to defend their lives and well-being must be taken up by rank-and-file educators themselves, in opposition to the CTU and the Democratic party. Teachers and all education staff should join the Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, an organization fighting to unite educators and other workers to save lives and end the pandemic.

This means stopping in-person learning and nonessential businesses until the pandemic is fully contained. Educators and all nonessential workers must be paid to stay home until vaccines are widely distributed. Remote learning must be implemented at a high level by providing every student and educator with state-of-the-art technology.

All those who wish to join this struggle should sign up today at wsws.org/edsafety and attend our meeting today!



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